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WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CHRIST ?

BY

FRANCIS W. NEWMAN,

Emeritus Professor of University College, London.

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HINDOOS are sometimes astonished to hear invectives from one or other zealous Christian against English education and English literature as "godless," when it has no definitely avowed theological creed. They insist, that even when the literature cautiously and purposely evades allusion to Christ and his teaching, it still is pervaded by Christian sentiment, winning the approval of some, but exciting the jealousy of others.

Christian writers, who have been accepted as standard advocates of the religion, have often boasted of peculiar excellence in its moral and spiritual tone. The morality of Aristotle and of the Stoics, they say,—great as the honour which each deserves on many accounts,—had special deficiencies, in part imputable to its standing aloof from religion. When God bore no part in it, man became too prominent, too self-sufficient. Their ideal of a perfect man differed sensibly from our ideal. Nobly self-sacrificing though he might be, his self-esteem was very perceptible and too conscious. The "magnanimous man" of Aristotle aspires to self-exaltation in forms which make him unamiable and almost absurd. The perfect man of the Stoics is to us too unemotional, too purely intellectual. Christian humility, as we name it, is at bottom only a sober and

reasonable measure of our own importance—necessarily small; yet it was hardly esteemed a virtue by the most eminently good heathens, nor had it any distinctive name: for its nearest Latin counterpart, *Modestia*, is not restricted to the quality which Christians name Humility; Meekness was certainly disesteemed. Further, it is claimed that our morality is pervaded by a spiritual element not often discoverable in the Socratic schools, and by a severer purity than any to which they aspired; also, that none of the Greeks—few indeed of the Romans—regarded all nations of men as brethren before God; but their patriotism unduly interfered with humanity. In short, these esteemed Christian advocates teach, as cumulative honour to the religion, that the disciples of the great Master breathe the spirit of the Master. Thus they permit us to infer, that the goodness of the Christian, as of the Christ—consisting (as it does and must) in something else than an orthodox creed—is felt without any talk about theology; inasmuch as it is a substantive moral essence, transcending the morality of antique philosophers.

If this be so, then to speak of “Christianity without Christ” is no paradox, no contradiction in terms, nothing that can deserve scoffs from the religious press of England. It *may* be true, that no man can attain Christian virtue without first believing the miraculous and unique supremacy of Jesus of Nazareth; but it is not an axiomatic truth. It needs proof to establish it. No one imagines that it is impossible to imbibe the moral virtues eminent in this or that school of philosophy without special beliefs concerning the person of the Founder. If such qualities commend themselves as virtues to the heart of Mankind, Man is naturally susceptible of them, and the paradox lies with those who deny that such virtues are attainable apart from the apparatus of miracle, and belief of things alien to common experience. Nay, as it was possible to *imitate*

Plato or Zeno without any belief that either teacher was supernatural, not even the zealous imitation of Christ at all obviously implies what is called "belief in Christ"; that is, belief that he was a miraculous personage, who in a coming High Day of the Universe will appear as the Divine Judge of living and dead.

For centuries back in Europe hundreds of pious souls have regarded the effort to imitate Christ as identical with an aspiration after all human virtue—an aspiration to obey God. Nor does this belong to the past only. With the majority of Christians it is an axiom, that the life of Jesus of Nazareth attained the highest point of human goodness, and that the more closely we follow in his steps, the more surely do we please God. The precept to imitate Jesus shows itself in literature for the first time in the epistles of Paul, who wrote to the Christians of Rome (xv. 2), "Let every one please his neighbour for good unto edification: for *even Christ pleased not himself.*" Apparently he then proceeds to reveal how he knew the fact—namely, from a Hebrew Psalm (lxi. 9); for he adds: "but, *as it is written*, the reproaches of them that reproached thee, fell upon *me*. For, whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the writings, might have hope." That is, the apostle referred them to the 69th Psalm to give them information of the personal qualities, which were predicted in Messiah, and *therefore* (no doubt) actually existed in Jesus. In writing to the Corinthians (2 Cor. x. 1) he does not distinctly call them to imitate Jesus, but (apparently) * he assumes them to know that Jesus was meek and gentle:

* Nevertheless, some will maintain, that as "the word of Christ" (Coloss. iii. 16) means only *Christian teaching*, not any definite words of Jesus, so "the gentleness of Christ" means only *Christian gentleness*. The Hebrew language is prone to use the genitive of a noun as a supplement for an adjective: as "O God of my righteousness," for, "O my righteous God." Hebraic Greek imbibed the idiom from Hebrew.

for he beseeches them "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" not to drive him to extremities in acting against their disobedience. In his letter to the Philippians Paul exhorts them to have the same mind as was in Christ (ii. 5); but in what instantly follows we find that he does not allude to anything in the human conduct of Jesus humanly attested, but only to the mystical fact, that when the Messiah pre-existed in a superhuman state ("in a divine form"), he divested himself of it, and submitted to the lowly form of a man. On the whole, Paul seems thus to explain his avowal (2 Cor. v. 16) that though he once "knew Christ after the flesh," he no longer so knows him: that is to say,—once he took interest in Jesus, or cognizance of him, as a human person; now he is past that stage, and regards only his superhuman character.

Peter also in his first Epistle says (ii. 21), "Christ left us an example, that ye should follow his steps; who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth; who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not, but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously." Obviously, if you look to this as historical testimony, there is not much in it. If it had been attested by observers, that Jesus was free from sin and from guile, no other freedom from sin and from guile could be understood, than such as man might testify of man in a thousand other cases in every age. Most persons will believe that the apostle meant *more* than sinlessness which can be vouched for by observers. Surely he had not in mind the conduct outwardly visible, but the inward perfection piously ascribed to Jesus by Christian faith. That this was his meaning, is made almost certain by the words which follow, as quoted above—words which the margin of our Bibles and the consent of interpreters unhesitatingly refer to Isaiah liii. That Jesus was free from sin and guile could not be established in any high and complete sense from even daily

contact with him. An observer must be all perfect himself, and all but a discernor of hearts, to bear valid testimony to the perfection of another. Peter did not learn the absolute moral perfection of *Jesus* from his own observation ; but he made sure of it, he had faith in it, because he interpreted a Hebrew prophet to say that *Messiah* had done no violence, neither was deceit in his mouth. That Jesus did not revile the soldiers who reviled him, nor threaten his judges, *may* have been known to Peter (who, according to Matt. xxvi. 58, was not actually present) by the testimony of others. But unless his logic was different from that of contemporary Christians, he “ had the word of Prophecy, a surer attestation, as a light shining in a dark place ” (2 Pet. i. 19), which told him that Messiah, “ when oppressed and afflicted, opened not his mouth ; ” not even when brought “ as a lamb to the slaughter.” Thus, in the mind of both Paul and Peter, as far as we can see, to imitate Jesus had no meaning properly historical. By meditation on prophecies which they applied to Messiah, or by studying the *ideal* of human virtue, they filled out to their imaginations, as best they might, the adult and perfect manhood, which (they inferred) *must* have been embodied in their Lord and Master, though, when he walked on this earth, Peter had most imperfectly discerned it. But, after all, the exhortations to imitate Christ are exceptional and almost isolated. In the writer to the Hebrews (who perhaps was Apollos) not so much as this appears. His Jesus has no other human trait than that of *suffering*, and thereby learning sympathy. The character is majestic, superhuman, ceremonial, or sacerdotal, with scarcely anything in it for us to imitate. The same remark applies to the Jesus of John the son of Zebedee, in the Apocalypse, and to the Jesus of John the Elder in his epistles. Nor in the epistles of James and Jude is any exhortation to imitate the human conduct of Jesus found. James, “ the Lord’s brother ” and first Bishop of Jerusalem,

bids us to take *the patriarch Job* and *the prophets* as examples of goodness (*καλοκαγαθίας*), and patience. Eminently noble and intensely moral as his epistle is—and of a colour wholly germane to the best precepts of the first three gospels—yet imitation of the human Jesus is no topic for him, any more than the cross and the resurrection, atonement by blood, justification by faith, or the pre-existence and divine nature of Christ.

The process of thought, which began with Paul and Peter before our gospels were written, has continued to the present day, nearly as if they had not been written. Disciples have not often attempted to imitate the actual conduct ascribed to Jesus in the narratives. They have taken a far better course in following their own highest convictions—or, let us say, the promptings of God's Spirit within them—and have moulded to their imagination the character of Jesus with a very superficial regard to the documents called historical. It is impossible to speak without sympathy and approval of the many pious men and women who have professed to take Jesus as the model of their conduct, and have, in fact, devoted themselves to a self-denying philanthropy. Guided by a noble instinct, they have picked out a few points from the gospel narratives to amplify and glorify, while passing over in silence many other and very significant portions. Accepting a few features, they have filled up their picture by bold and independent imagination of what *must* have been the conduct of a holy and heavenly being. Misgiving, if sometimes it arose from parts of the narrative, has been quieted by the theory that he had a supernatural insight into hypocrisy and wickedness; moreover, that he was meek and lowly in spirit has been accepted as fact, because he is said to have said it. Traditional and pictorial skill has given solidity and fixedness to the popular belief of the character of Jesus; so that those whom we *may* and *do* revere have rejoiced to call themselves not disciples only,

but *imitators* of Jesus. Nothing here is written against such Christians, who live according to the spirit, not according to the letter, of a book which they account sacred. Much less do I disparage the ideal of perfection, which I believe them to hold up to their imagination.

Nevertheless, there is a second side of the subject, which urgently demands attention, at which, nevertheless, very few are willing to look. The plain fact is, that the character of Jesus, *as actually drawn in the gospels*, abounds with manifest and grievous blots ; and of necessity, whenever a book is made sacred, its worst parts become more widely influential than its best. Hence, unless we destroy that reverence which forbids criticism and subjugates the mind, we cannot act against a pernicious influence. It is not here asserted that the gospel picture is true, nor yet that it is false, though in many details its inaccuracy is beyond reasonable doubt. But what is here pressed is, that *either* the picture drawn for Jesus is grossly false, so that the narrative deserves no reverence, but needs slow belief and severe criticism ; *else*, Jesus of Nazareth was not at all the equably perfect character which his disciples imagine, but (with whatever high and partial excellence) his whole mind was pervaded by a reprehensible fanaticism.

The first fact which I signalize is, the evil and odious result which follows, as soon as any one, accepting the letter of the precept, believes himself safe, if he imitate the conduct of Jesus as described in the gospels. The public press has recently told us of a Baptist minister in San Francisco, who has taken up the cause of a large body of workmen, *so called* ; men who will *not* work, except for such wages as they themselves dictate ; men who display ferocious cruelty to the Chinese because they work for less. The preacher severely attacks the avarice of capitalists, to which he imputes the stoppage of white labour, and asks them (in the words attributed to Jesus) *how they can escape*

the damnation of hell? No reason appears for doubting his sincerity and his belief that he is doing just the right thing in *imitating the Saviour*. Of course, he is condemned by a vast majority of the educated and the thoughtful. He is declared to be a conceited fool for thinking that because one who could see into men's hearts might pronounce stern and dreadful sentence on them, therefore every one of us may do the same thing. To this I give full assent; but surely, if even this case stood alone (and it does not at all stand alone), it would suffice to show how dangerous is the precept of imitating Jesus in the only sense in which rude and vehement intellects can understand it. If his position was unique, if his powers of discernment were unique, if his authority was perfect as his knowledge, if his task was wholly peculiar, then it is most improper to imitate him: none but a conceited man with a twist in his mind will do so, and the doctrine IMITATIO CHRISTI, for which so loud a trumpet has been blown, ought rather to be changed into "Beware of imitating one who was essentially unlike to us."

But the form of conduct persistently ascribed to Jesus in the gospels cannot be justified by any theory concerning his divine knowledge and power. No man can make sure how a really divine messenger, gifted with miraculous power and insight into the heart, would act; but, *unless* we are to sacrifice moral judgment, and become Pagans bowing blindly to Power moral or immoral—that is to say, *if* we are to venerate God as Benevolent and Wise—we necessarily are confident as to how his messenger would *not* act. He certainly would not *so* speak, as to lead his hearers, *while judging from the best morality and highest wisdom current among them*, of necessity to condemn him morally. If he chose to mask himself as a man, and dissemble his super-human nature, he would take care not to present himself as one whose good behaviour was lower than the average,—one

extravagant in his language, enormous in his claims of superiority, scanty in expounding his position, bitter and fierce to all who were incredulous. Christian divines have debated, and will perhaps debate by the hour, whether Jesus did or did not rest his authority on his miracles. The epistles of Paul, Peter, and James may lead one to doubt whether these apostles had ever heard of Jesus as a worker of miracles: but it cannot be denied that in the gospels an immense stress is often laid upon them. Nevertheless, the three first narratives do not pretend that he ever worked miracles within cognizance of the rulers, or when asked for his authority. On the contrary, they represent him as casting out devils in distant places or by stealth, and forbidding those healed by him to reveal it; refusing to give a sign from heaven; indeed, stigmatizing those who asked for it as a wicked and adulterous generation (Matt. xii. 39, xvi. 4). When asked for proof of his authority to teach (Matt. xxi. 23), he does not reply that his unparalleled miracles are his evidence of divine authority, but he evades the question by asking them, What authority had John the Baptist? He thus puts himself on a par, as regards authority, with one who never professed to work nor was thought to work miracles. No one who will not grossly mutilate and garble these gospels, can reasonably deny that, according to them, Jesus often refused to give any external dazzling proof of his mission,—any proof cognizable to the senses and to the unspiritual mind. Hereby he assumed the position of one whose duty it was (in Paul's words) to *commend himself to men's consciences*. The fourth gospel, called John's, states that when asked for a "sign," he replied: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Matthew represents the same words to have been imputed to him by *false* witnesses. John tells us, that he meant the temple of his body; but his interrogators could not so understand him. If he really replied thus,

they would innocently and confidently regard it as clear that he was an impostor, who made sure that they would not pull down the temple in order to see whether he could miraculously reinstate it. Matthew, moreover, plainly declares that Jesus could not do many miracles before certain persons (xiii. 58), *because of their unbelief*;—a decisive avowal that miracles were not the divine process for generating faith in the incredulous. Thus the only evidence on which the priests and elders could rest a belief in his divine mission was purely moral and spiritual; a fact which made it simply impossible that a really divine messenger should so act, as to appear not *superior* to ordinary men in moral goodness, but *inferior*. Inferior he would necessarily appear, if he uttered condemnations which nothing could justify but a divine insight into men's hearts. For the rulers were then left without any means of discovering his supereminent wisdom and virtue, and could not help regarding him as outrageous.

If we try to sum up from the gospels what outline of his character was presented to the priests and elders, we find simply thus much, that he had forsaken his trade of carpenter, and had become a wanderer in the land, not working for his livelihood as Paul afterwards did, but living as a religious mendicant; that he disowned his mother's claim on him, and had induced *twelve* men (Luke says *seventy* more) to become a sort of retinue of honour to him, two of them at least abandoning a parent at his call. No one can imagine that dry facts such as these had any cogent force to recommend him as Messiah or as a Prophet. But since he was largely known to be a teacher, nothing was left to commend him to men's consciences but his *words*: and it was of vital importance that his utterances should not be such as to revolt and repel those whom it was his task to win. If it would be utterly wrong for one of us to fling at men in authority and clergymen, with-

out proof, without ceremony, and without discrimination, such epithets as fools and blind, hypocrites, children of hell, vipers, whited sepulchres, and so on ; then such a tone of address was morally impossible, alike to any wise man and to a divine messenger, whose task it was to win his hearers by appeal to their moral faculties. For, instead of attracting them by a manifestation of goodness, it would shock them all, lead to a universal and deep disapprobation, and drive into active hostility all who had not a marvellous forbearance seldom found in union with high office. No man not insane would so act, except with the purpose of exasperating them : hence it is inconsistent alike with a moderately wise man and with an incarnate God.

All this is so very manifest that reply seems impossible. But a learned Anglican divine has solemnly warned me that to sit in judgment on Jesus (he means, on the conduct ascribed to Jesus by anonymous writers of unknown date) is intrinsically inadmissible, because (says he) I cannot be quite sure that Jesus will not be my judge at the last day. If I may not use my moral faculties to judge of a book proffered as sacred, I am shut up into possible Paganism : there is no absurdity, no enormity, no impurity which I may not swallow. But I claim further that if Matthew be trustworthy, Jesus himself bids me sit in judgment on him. For he is made to say, “ Beware of false prophets : ye shall know them by their fruits,” &c. He virtually lays down for me *a general rule* that if any man come to me, professing to be a prophet from God, I must not be in a hurry to take him at his word, but must compare his professions with facts. This is to me the only honourable interpretation of his precept : but I told my learned monitor that if he chose to insist on another interpretation, I was aware that he could reason powerfully for it ; namely, if he expounded the passage as follows :—“ If any one, *except myself*, come to you as a prophet, be not quick to believe :

beware of him, especially if he praise himself; for this may be the sheep's clothing on a wolf. Compare his conduct with his pretensions. Examine whether he is simple and consistent, or confused, enigmatic, evasive, and a shifter of his ground, especially as to his claims of divine authority. If he extol his doctrine as unparalleled in wisdom, compare it severely with earlier teachings. If he avow that 'he is meek and lowly,' watch whether he is not arrogant and dictatorial, pleased with abject submission and prostration, haughty to simple questions, irritable, virulent in language, and immeasurably high in his claims. But, *observe carefully*, nothing of this applies to *my* claims. Never compare *my* professions with facts. Never suspect *me* when I praise myself. Never doubt *my* meekness, however irritable and foul-mouthed I may seem to be. Never criticize *my* precepts, however extravagant their aspect. Against those who criticize ME, the Queen of Sheba and the men of Nineveh shall rise up in judgment, and I MYSELF will disown them before my Father which is in heaven." He must be a very reckless and fanatical Christian who imputes to his Lord so dishonouring an interpretation of his words.

Many Christian controversialists indulge themselves in the fancy that it is the goodness and holiness of Jesus which alone raises opposition to the gospels. Truth and Holiness are indeed the two jewels which Religion is bound to enshrine and conserve; but for that very reason the criticism, which is by some slanderously called blasphemous, becomes essential to those who know the proneness of mankind to accept delusive pretensions, sham truth, sham holiness. As soon as we begin seriously to compare the conduct ascribed to Jesus with the notions of right which have world-wide acceptance, a moral shock is felt in chapter after chapter,—nor can the theory that he was an incarnate God in any case relieve the monstrosity. In Matthew and Luke he sends out deputies to preach; namely, the twelve

apostles in Matt. x., the seventy disciples in Luke x. In each case the moral features are the same. They are to recite the formula, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand, [or] is come nigh to you." On entering a town they are to salute a house in hope that it may be "worthy." If they are not received, Jesus declares (Matt. x. 14, Luke x. 11) that in the day of judgment that city will be accounted *more guilty than Sodom and Gomorrha*. "He that receiveth *you* (he adds) receiveth *me*, and he that receiveth *me* receiveth HIM that sent me." Surely such utterances, so far from being wise and admirable, are unjust and irrational! No man becomes a messenger from God by repeating a parrot phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." If a member of Mrs. Girling's sect knock at our door, and utter some such formula, and we shut the door in his face, are we less guilty than these cities of Israel? or why less guilty? Jesus tells us—It is because HE sent these messengers! If He was really a superhuman being, yet chose to maintain a disguise, it was foolish and immoral in him to complain that common men were blinded by the disguise. Yet through the whole narrative this tone runs. Every one is accounted impious who does not by a mysterious instinct see through the mask. Every one who is quick to believe in his vast superiority is extolled as pious: in Luke even a harlot's affection for him is avowed to earn forgiveness for her sins (Luke vii. 42, 47).

While it is open to a theorist to allege that if a Son of God came down from heaven to teach authoritatively, he would never come in disguise, that is not the argument here adopted. But what I maintain to be incredible is, that an incarnate God, after hiding himself under the mask of manhood, *should reason evasively, scold impotently, and escape from the scene of life furtively*. Paul holds up to us a beautiful outline of the teacher who comes in God's name (2 Tim. ii. 24): "The servant of the Lord must not strive,

but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, enduring of evil [men or things] ; in meekness instructing opponents, if God peradventure may give them repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth." Paul disapproves of striving (*μάχεσθαι*) ; would he approve of scolding ? and of railing ? of heaping up epithets more offensive than any flung out by our bitterest political wranglers ? and this, as far as appears, without provocation, and without moral result. To Pharisees and Teachers of the Law they could appear as nothing but outpourings from a malignant heart. Gentleness, candour and patience to inquirers are not visible even once in these narratives. Jesus is made uniformly obscure, abrupt, enigmatic, evasive to questioners. Nay, Matthew tells us (xiii. 10—15) that Jesus confidentially explained to his disciples that he did not intend the multitudes to understand him, and purposely spoke to them in enigmas, which he knew must be unintelligible. Would then Paul have accounted him "apt to teach" ? When one of his own disciples asked him, whether his precept was addressed to them in particular, or to every one, a direct and simple reply might have seemed inevitable (Luke xii. 41) ; nevertheless, only an oracular response, as dark as from the cavern of Pytho, is elicited ; a response in the form of an interrogation : " Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household ? " words which do not shed a ray of light on Peter's natural and reasonable doubt. If a question was put to Jesus by any religious but educated man, neither a civil nor an instructive reply could be counted on ; so prevalent is the imputation to him of insult and defiance when any invested with authority wanted from him reasons and proof. Hearers who desire to be his submissive disciples do not fare much better, at least in Luke. Jesus called out to one, " Follow me ; " and when he replied, " Lord (or sire), suffer me first to go and bury my father,"

Jesus is made to reply heartlessly, "Let the dead bury their dead, but go thou *and preach the kingdom of God.*" Another said, "Lord, I will follow thee, but let me first go and bid farewell to them which are at home in my house;" yet he did but elicit an unsympathetic and harsh answer. *Heartlessly* imperfectly expresses the gross offence here offered to the primary moralities of life, to family affection and duty: and for what object? If the nameless disciple had been a Paul, what damage to "the kingdom of God" would have ensued by his spending two or three hours at a father's funeral? But (forsooth) only the dead in soul are to bury the dead in body! If Mohammed had given utterance to such precepts, Christians would call them outrageous and brutal.

Nothing can be more evasive than the treatment of questioners by the Jesus of the narrators, as—in regard to the urgent and painful doubt, whether allegiance to a foreign prince was not positively forbidden by Deut. xvii. 15. Again, when asked what was his authority or title to Messiahship, he was bound to instruct the people mildly, if the current expectation of signs and wonders was an error. Nothing can be darker or less consistent with simplicity than his systematic application to himself of the title "Son of Man," a title which could be at will either pressed as Messianic, or explained away as unassuming. Nothing would be less creditable than the answer, "Destroy this temple," ascribed to him in John ii. 19, whether he had or had not a secret double sense. No subtle wrangler in a school least honoured for candour can outdo the sophistry which defended "I give unto them eternal life; I and God my Father are one," by the plea that in Hebrew poetry leaders are styled gods (John x. 28—36). The whole tissue of conduct ascribed to him is such as cannot be justified by a purely moral critic, whatever his theory concerning the person of Jesus. Moral criticism will either dishonour the narrative as grossly in-

accurate and virtually slanderous, or will pronounce that Jesus was neither a prophet from heaven nor an immaculate man. To forbid criticism is a cheap defence.

Theodore Parker in America adopted the double method of disbelieving the narrative in one part, but believing it and censuring Jesus in other parts. It is not here contended that such attempts to recover the historical facts are wholly and necessarily vain. But every thoughtful person, every mature mind, might be expected to see the impossibility of winning general acceptance for a narrative, if after 1800 years it needs to be conjecturally patched up and worked into harmony with our more advanced moral perceptions. To correct, cancel, and re-write documents of the past until a character depicted in them is made ideally perfect according to our notions of perfection, certainly cannot aid or exalt our morality: what historian of repute will admit that it can aid us to historical truth? No end whatever seems attained by our toil. No man can base Morals or Religion on even the most perfect History; much less on narratives full of misapprehensions and needing multifarious expurgation. Still, if a rising school in England with which I feel warm sympathy will execute that task which its Highest Genius declares to be needful, it may be my duty to reconsider some matters. At present it is a more urgent duty to take to heart the moral certainty, that the millennial sufferings of the Jewish nation from the cruel injustice of Christians are largely due to the one-sided utterances diffused through these gospels.

I am told, that to censure the Jesus herein depicted is a mean, not to say malignant, undertaking; prosaic and adverse to spirituality. But Justice never can be unspiritual, be it ever so prosaic. It is surely more malignant to believe easily that the ancient nation, on whose piety we still continue to feed, were both intensely stupid and gratuitously wicked, and that their teaching made their heathen converts

children of hell (Matt. xxiii. 15), than to account legend writers credulous or one man fanatical, whichever may be our alternative. Let us try to recite the undeniable facts of the case,—the crimes attributed to the adversaries of Jesus. The cardinal fact is his crucifixion, to which Pagan writers allude, as undoubtedly inflicted by the Roman Governor. Crucifixion was not a Jewish punishment, nor did Roman policy allow to the Jews power over life and death : hence the direct and chief responsibility rests with Pontius Pilate. If any one was guilty, he was the chief criminal. But, according to all the four narratives, Pilate was most unwilling to condemn Jesus, and acted under fear of being accused at Rome of injudicious lenity. This implies that Jesus had committed himself to conduct which ostensibly was the first step of insurrection : nothing less could make it dangerous for Pilate to acquit him ; and herewith all the narratives are in entire harmony. The tale in this part is self-consistent, and agrees with probabilities. Moreover, this is precisely that part of the narrative which Tradition was most competent to transmit accurately. Besides the immediate friends and disciples of Jesus, many inhabitants of Jerusalem, who soon after were converts, must have personally known the details of Pilate's judgment, and were sure to remember them to their lives' end. For full forty years, evangelists had great facility for gathering sound knowledge on the question, " For what alleged crime was Jesus crucified ? " And the tale runs thus :—Jesus, in order to exhibit himself as fulfilling a prophecy of Zechariah (ix. 9) concerning a king of Jerusalem, who was to have dominion from sea to sea, had ridden into Jerusalem on an ass over garments spread in the road amid triumphal branches, while a very great multitude shouted to him as King of Israel and Son of David. Several deadly revolts had cost the Romans much blood and anxiety, and in all of them religious zeal had held the torch of war. In consequence,

Roman jealousy of religious movements in Judea was intense, and Pilate needed full proof that Jesus was *not* aiming at royalty, as others had done, before he dared to acquit him. He made several attempts to elicit from Jesus a renunciation of the title, "King of the Jews;" but could get nothing out of him but what appeared to be an obstinate assertion and retention of the title. For when asked, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" (Matt. xxvii. 11.) Jesus answered, "Thou sayest it;" which in that idiom is interpreted, "You have hit the exact mark." But after confessing thus much, Jesus refused all explanation, and became (what a Roman would call) contumaciously silent. By this refusal to exculpate himself from the imputed guilt of rebellion, he deprived Pilate of all arguments for saving him. But according to the narratives, Pilate was still uneasy in conscience, and, if we accept the tale, seems to have tried to save his life, even after condemning him to the cross. The title, "King of the Jews," was written over him, obviously to warn future insurgents; yet what Pilate inwardly thought is clearly enough suggested, and may be supplied as follows: "Stupid wretch! I did what I could to save him. He insists on calling himself King of the Jews, and will not add a word to strengthen me against accusation, and enable me to prove that he is *no* insurgent. Since he rushes on his fate, he deserves his fate. Yet I will try to save his life, for he seems a sheepish fanatic—no warrior. I will have him taken from the cross as early as I decently can, and will give him up to his friends. *Perhaps* they will restore him, and, after the taste of crucifixion, he will be a soberer and better man."

What judgment may be passed upon Pilate, in comparison with average Romans, for the part which he is said to have played, is of very minor importance; but our judgment concerning the conduct ascribed to Jesus himself, and to the Jewish rulers, is really important. Unless the narrators

grossly deceive us, Jesus was a deliberate accomplice in his own death, by refusing to explain an ambiguous phrase and ambiguous acts. When a man has done nothing at all ambiguous, and perceives that his death is determined on, he may afford to be too proud to exculpate himself. But when his judge desires to set him free, and wants only a few words of frank avowal that no insurrection was intended, then to refuse those necessary words and hereby drive his reluctant judge into deadly severity, is surely a greater sin than to rush upon death by one's own direct act. The man who stabs himself or drowns himself does not implicate another in his guilt, as does the fanatic in quest of martyrdom. The effort "to imitate Jesus" bore abundant fruit in this respect; but, in particular, the conduct attributed to so eminent a bishop as Ignatius may be here alluded to. While he was on his way towards Rome, where he expected (or rather hoped) to be put to death as a Christian, he is believed to have written to friends there, imploring them *not* to use influence in high quarters to save him, *lest they deprive him of the crown of martyrdom!* And this conduct has not lessened admiration of him in the Christian Church to this day. Such influence has IMITATIO CHRISTI.

But what of the Jewish elders? That the High Council did accuse Jesus, I suppose no one will doubt; and since they could neither wish nor expect the Roman Governor to make himself judge of their sacred law, it becomes certain that their accusation was purely political, and took such a form as this: "He has accepted tumultuous shouts that he is the legitimate and predicted King of Israel, and in this character has ridden into Jerusalem with the forms of state understood to be royal and sacred; *with what purpose*, we ask, if not to overturn *our* institutions and *your* dominion?" If Jesus spoke, at the crisis which Matthew represents, the virulent speech attributed to him in Matt. xxiii., we may well believe that this gave a new

incentive to the rulers ; for it is such as no Government in Europe would overlook or forgive ; but they are not likely to have expected Pilate to care for any conduct which might be called an ecclesiastical broil. The assumption of royalty was clearly the point of their attack. Even the mildest man among them may have thought his conduct dangerous and needing repression. How many of them pushed revenge to the bitter end and worked on Pilate's fears, the gospels do not affect to know, nor can we conjecture. Royal jealousy in England has perpetrated so many cruel murders, that Englishmen acquainted with their national history are bound to judge as mildly of those Priests and Teachers of the Law as they judge concerning our Sovereigns and Statesmen who have been confronted with alarm of insurrection.

It is not rare for writers and speakers to call Jesus a *martyr for truth* : they mean, a victim to his proclamation of truth. But this is in violent opposition to the only detailed accounts which have come down to us. In them he makes himself a victim by claiming a mystical title, which, if he had explained it to be *merely* mystical, would no more have frightened or offended Pontius Pilate or Tiberius Cæsar than the claim of a conceited Stoic to be a king, while other men were slaves. Much rather, it was by proclaiming a *half* truth, and refusing so to expound it as to hinder its suggesting an *entire falsehood*, that he made himself a victim : a very slender foundation to build on, in proof that he was a martyr for truth. Most certain it is, that to imitate the silence imputed to Jesus, when brought before a public tribunal for conduct ambiguous and suspicious, would in modern Europe be esteemed fanatical guilt. Paul may have believed nothing of this account : for he lived and died before our gospels were written. His method of sitting loose to historical attestations has at least the advantage, that, in striving to imitate Christ, one is not

led into the ditch by a blind evangelist ; but each man aims at his own highest ideal of perfection.

The practical precepts in which Paul, Peter, and James agree, have very noble elements, moral and spiritual, which, having once become acknowledged over the breadth of Europe as our highest ideal of right, will never be forgotten, never will be permanently depreciated. Jews hold to them, as loyally as Christians : if Christian nations *acted* on them, the feud of Moslem and Christian would not be perpetual. This "sacred tradition" has in itself a glorious vitality, which Christians may unblameably entitle immortal. But it certainly will not lose in beauty, grandeur, or truth, if all the details concerning Jesus which are current in the gospels and all the mythology of his person be forgotten or discredited. Christianity will remain without Christ.

This formula has in it nothing paradoxical. Rightly interpreted, it simply means: *All that is best in Judæo-Christian sentiment, moral or spiritual, will survive, without Rabbinical fancies, cultured by perverse logic ; without huge piles of fable built upon them ; without the Oriental Satan, a formidable rival to the throne of God ; without the Pagan invention of Hell and Devils.*

A friend who, on the whole, agrees with the argument of these pages, adds the following "reserve." He jealously insists, that it is *a rational hypothesis* that the *real* Jesus was a man of great spiritual gifts, a sort of St. Francis Assisi ; that he may have popularized certain spiritual ideas heretofore existing only in an esoteric form in Palestine, and that the floating tradition of the character may have won Paul to the Nazarene sect. I am not aware that I have here written a word against such hypothesis. To myself indeed, as I have elsewhere insisted,* it is clear that Paul's morality rose *high above* that attributed by Church tradition to Jesus. If we have actually no trustworthy

* Especially in a tract called "Religion, not History."

details of the life and death of the latter, all are at liberty, with perfectly good logic, to attribute hypothetic qualities to him, within the limits of human nature. Yet I cannot see any religious importance in speculations concerning a merely possible past. Men of common cultivation in this nineteenth century—if we except eccentric minds capable of welcoming delusion, novel or ancient—will not try to base an historical religion upon possibilities where facts are unknown. If indeed the gospel according to the Hebrews came suddenly to light, and if therein it appeared that the conduct of Jesus was quite different from that which is imputed to him in our four gospels, and his moral precepts were therein as pure and lofty as those of Aristotle and Paul, instead of the low self-seeking prevalently inculcated by Jesus in Matthew and Luke; if moreover it appeared, that in that earliest narrative no blame whatever could be attached to Jesus by the severest moral criticism, I most sincerely profess that the discovery would give me personal relief. But while conceding that my friend's "hypothesis" is *rational*, I cannot pretend that any known phenomena make it *probable* that the real conduct of Jesus to the rulers of his nation, or his mode of alternately dissembling and claiming Messiahship, or the ground and character of his moral precepts, or his behaviour to Pilate, were more unblameable, wiser, and purer than our evangelists represent. Much rather do I side with the received belief, that out of numerous attempts to record the life of Jesus, the sound moral instinct of the Church selected the noblest and purest. The existing apocryphal gospels give no suggestion that narratives no longer existing depicted a more faultless character. Converts raised under the teaching of Paul—I may add of Peter, if a single document be a sufficient specimen of Peter's moral heart—were *extremely unlikely*, in my opinion, when a nobler and more faultless character of

Jesus was presented to them in an earlier gospel, to reject the better (nay, so trample it into contempt, that it became utterly lost), and then consecrate reverently narratives less truthful, and morally less free from objection. And who can believe that a religion claiming world-wide acceptance was in any sense supernatural, if no guarantees were taken that its Founder and his precepts were truly represented to the world? The "powers of hell," according to this hypothesis, not only dilapidated the Church, but tore up the foundations irreparably in about a century and a-half after the death of the Founder.

I have often been asked, sometimes very sarcastically, how it happens that it is reserved to my keenness of sight to discover in Jesus errors and failures which have hitherto escaped notice from the avowed opponents of Christianity. My sufficient reply is, that I know no reason to think that any who at all studied the gospels were less keen-sighted than I am. Catholic enemies of Christianity, like Voltaire, knew the religion through the Church, not through the books which we call the New Testament, which, so far as known, would seem to them, as to the first Protestants, simply a valuable aid against Catholic Sacerdotalism. Their natural process was to flout the pomp of bishops by the poverty of Jesus, and the policy of their warfare led them to disparage the morality of the Church by exalting the virtue of its Founder. I am not aware whether Voltaire was a diligent student of the gospels, but I easily believe that disgust at French Cardinals, and other dignitaries of the Church, made him enjoy the attacks of Jesus on the priests of his day. "*A man of genius*, and of low birth, bravely defying and denouncing a PRIESTHOOD," is an object at once captivating to certain minds, which admire Pagan bravery more than Christian meekness. All "hero-worshippers," perhaps, are of this class. They never pretend that their hero is morally immaculate,

and, in judging of a hero, seldom apply a high moral standard.

But nothing of this is my main and decisive reply to the sarcasm. The certain fact is that the outrageous cruelty of Christians made it unsafe for Deists and other unbelievers or half-believers to speak frankly and fully. Voltaire had grieved over the horrible fate of a Frenchman, whose tongue was judicially torn out of his throat for the offence of speaking irreverently of the Virgin Mary. Was it likely that any criticism on Jesus which the Church rulers of that day could interpret as speaking evil of him (that is, "blaspheming" him) would be treated more gently? I easily believe, that, had I lived in the last century under that French rule with my present mind, I should have concluded reticence, so far as truth allowed, concerning the moral weaknesses of the gospels, to be truer wisdom than utterances too frank for the age to bear. As for our English writers, neither Jews nor other unbelievers had secure toleration here, if their free writing stirred up animosity. Christians complain that Gibbon does not argue openly, but *sneers*—the truth being that, because of Christian intolerance, Gibbon had to avoid whatever might in a court of law have been termed blasphemy. To deny the Trinity or the Deity of Jesus was a penal offence by English law until more than a tenth part of this century was past. Gibbon's history did not carry him to the personal life or precepts of Jesus; but no English Deist in the past was free from terror of the wicked laws. Only in more recent times, through the notorious abounding of extreme unbelief, no attorney-general is eager for the heavy task of prosecuting it. Where scientific Atheism is rife, Jews and other Theists are small game to fly at. Therefore we have now immeasurably more freedom of speech than was enjoyed in past centuries.

But I have something more to add,—a single fact, yet a

very suggestive one. Some years ago I was in a rather large company of strangers, when a gentleman came up to me and gave his name, Dr. —, a physician; then proceeded to speak as follows:—"Since I read something which you have written, I have wished for an opportunity to tell you in private what I have long believed. I take up the Gospels from a medical point of view. I do not think we have the means of knowing the causes which perverted the mind of Jesus, but I am convinced that he was (at least in the later stage) *insane*; whether from vigils and fastings,* or from agitation of mind and elation concerning Messiahship, I do not pretend to know. But unless I believed him to have been strictly insane, I should have to pass the gravest judgment on his conduct." I have never heard that this thoughtful physician ever imparted to the world the conviction which he opened thus confidentially to me. If the law-courts no longer prosecute for heresy or blasphemy, yet any avowal of total unbelief is apt to damage success in a profession, and to bring on fanatical outcry in a political career. Very few love martyrdom, and those few are fools. Christians have no right to demand much free speaking in adversaries, while Christian zeal punishes in pocket and position those emphatically who speak freely. Moreover, in every family, it is painful to be too frank. Nor have Christians a right to expect that those who think historical Christianity to be manifestly baseless or pernicious, will study the Christian documents carefully enough to be competent for their minute discussion. Surely here is abundant explanation why all free criticism of the character emblazoned in the four gospels now appears new.

All who call themselves Free Christians know the evils inflicted upon us by Christian Mythology. With it the vast

* A friend reminds me that Jesus is represented as *not* fasting. Certainly not in obedience to ecclesiastic routine: but if he worked at expulsion of demons, and believed fasting to be an essential condition of success in difficult cases (Matt. xvii. 21), he is likely to have fasted often and much.

majority of pulpits are so pre-occupied, that *Morals can scarcely be taught*. In the Sunday-schools Jewish and Christian tales are too apt to drive out common and necessary moral teaching ; yet most ministers are jealous of other moral teaching than their own, so that our boys grow up disgracefully ill-taught as to daily duty, and constantly are pests to a neighbourhood beyond anything reported even of Islam and Pagans. While the four gospels are nationally revered, Free Christians will always dread, with very good reason, that their children will relapse into the errors which the parents have abandoned ; and much time and energy of *their* pulpits will be exerted in fencing off this danger. Until the four gospels are displaced from the sacred position most gratuitously awarded to them, there will be no stable progress of truth. As in the battle with Paganism, Idols must be broken, if Idolatry is to be overthrown.

THE END.





